

Dalit Literature

GPD

In December 1981 the *Lokayan (Gujarat)* organised a pioneering seminar on *Dalit literature* in Bombay. It was pioneering in the sense that it was the first of, what might hopefully become, a series of get-togethers of Marathi and Gujarati *Dalit writers and critics*. The fact that it was the first of its kind and also that two literatures were presented and discussed made some of the proceedings of the seminar very formal and elementary. Nevertheless the seminar succeeded in identifying some of the problems that *Dalit writers* face, particularly in Gujarat. The *Dalit movement* is relatively young in Gujarat. It does not have a tradition in terms of either a social movement or a literary movement, as it certainly has in Maharashtra. Precisely for that reason the deliberations showed earnestness and led to exchange of some useful information and experience.

About forty people had come from Gujarat. Last year a little magazine called *Akrosh* published from Ahmedabad suddenly acquired national fame following the government ban on one of its issues. The issue in question had published some *Dalit poetry* which 'the progressive section of the national *bourgeoisie*' in power in Ahmedabad had found to be inflammatory material and so the issue was banned. All the young people connected with *Akrosh* participated in the exchange of views. The number of Marathi *Dalit writers* who attended the seminar was much smaller. One wonders why that happened. There were not more than three or four Marathi *Dalit writers* as against nearly twentyfive Gujarati *Dalit writers*. Apart from the *Dalit writers* themselves, the seminar was attended by literary critics, socialist thinkers and social scientists.

The seminar was a success. It must have been the first time somebody made a serious effort to go into the social and historical genesis of *Dalit protest* in Gujarat. The first day was taken up in the discussion of the social framework of the *Dalit protest* in Gujarat. The discussion provided the basic statistical data on the distribution of the *Dalit population* in Gujarat, bringing out some often ignored statistical facts such as that fifteen per cent of the population of Ahmedabad is made up of *Dalits* and that the percentage of *Dalits* in the population of Sabarkantha district is as high as twentyfive. The speakers went into the history of rising *Dalit consciousness* and the

Dalit movement, the various influences this movement has absorbed and the fact that unlike Maharashtra, Gujarat has lacked a continuous movement for social reform and protest, epitomised in Maharashtra by Phule, Agarkar and Ambedkar. The discussants like Bhanu Adhwaryu, Mohammed Sheikh, Manishi Jani, Achyut Yagnik, Punalekar and others sought to identify the various *scheduled castes*, their problems and their response to the movement and the repression — both social and governmental — around them. Bhalchandra Phadke, Arun Kamble, Arjun Dangle, Dinkar Sakrikar and Deshpande provided the Maharashtra backdrop to these discussions.

Another interesting feature of the discussion was the attempt made by some, notably Dalpat Chauhan, to relate the present day protest to the protest literature of the middle ages. There was some lively controversy over this. While commentators like Chauhan and Sonalkar related contemporary protest to traditional protest-literature, those like Deshpande related it to the impact of Europe and maintained that the contemporary protest is modern, or in any case has to be modern to be really effective, and that it is discontinuity rather than continuity which is the more relevant aspect of situation.

The experimentation in terms of form that is going on in *Dalit literature* was analysed by Manishi Jani (particularly the street play), Sheikh, Phadke, Arjun Dangle, Arun Kamble and others. The discussions, however, were a little disjointed and lacked an overall perspective. The critical discussion was even less coherent. What does and should the *rejection of established aesthetics* mean? The answers seemed to vary. The participants did not appear to have a clear notion of such rejection. Kamble and Phadke on the Marathi side of the gathering were content to repeat the familiar rhetoric. By comparison, the Gujarati writers appeared far more serious in grappling with this question. The same was true of the discussion on the language which *Dalit writers* employ. Whom are they communicating with? What is going to happen to the linguistic mode with which the *Dalit writers* are quite familiar today after a generation or two more of urbanisation? Does and should the rejection of 'Brahmanical' literature necessarily involve turning one's back on traditional literature and language as literature and language? Again the younger Gujarat movement had a better understanding of and more earnest involvement in these questions than the few Marathi writers present. A part of the reason for this, however, is that Marathi *Dalit literature* has already at a practical level solved this question. Its language is in fact more living, volatile and authentic. Critical formulations which might explain its authenticity and sincerity are, however, badly needed. The discussions at the Seminar seemed to underline this lacuna.

On the second day the seminar turned to a critical estimate of the trends in the *Dalit literature*. The *Dalit movement* and literature_, the need for their firm rooting in the

materialist tradition, the nature and import of the 'convert to Buddhism' movement, and so on were discussed. One must mention here that unlike the Maharashtra *Dalits*, the Gujarat *Dalits* are less dominated by Ambedkar and his personality. In fact one Gujarati *Adivasi writer* did raise the question whether some of the formulations of Ambedkar might not be dated now. Whereas for the *Dalits* of Maharashtra Ambedkar's thought seems to be the horizon beyond which they need not and cannot see, the Gujarat writers, while they were aware of the significance of Ambedkar, were willing to approach any thinker without putting such limitations. Being in the formative stages perhaps, the Gujarat movement appeared to be far more open-minded than its Marathi counterpart.

There was discussion of the incipient idealism which has come to dominate *Dalit writing and criticism*, This idealism may partly be responsible for *Dalit writers and critics* seeming to take a remarkably narrow view of their predicament. Deshpande pointed out that reading *Dalit socio-political analysis and criticism* one got a feeling that India was an island completely free of outside influences. They seemed unaware that every phenomenon has an international aspect today. Ashok Patil talked of the *Shramana Culture* and the *Brahmanical Culture* quite rightly but seemed unaware that there were other cultures too and these were no less dangerous than the *Brahmanical* one.

The present writer gets the feeling every time he hears *Dalit writers* and critics that they are making valid points in and about a narrow region of experience. There is, however, a bigger world outside that region. Their main point very correctly is that the mainstream literatures in our country relate to a world of experience which is quite small and narrow. The *Lokayan seminar* made that point once again. But the *Dalit writers* are blissfully unaware of a bigger world of which even their areas of experience are a part. This seminar was yet another testimony to this lack of awareness or indifference. One wishes that the *Dalit writers* extend their analysis and vision to areas beyond the ones they have been handling. If they did they might come up with almost revolutionary answers, They certainly have the potential.